New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1953

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Sherlock Holmes"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 31, 1953

'Sherlock' Opens At the Century

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Yesterday it seemed impossible to make "Sherlock Holmes" dull. Today it just seems unforgivable.

Last night on the stage at the Century, the great detective, he of the ingenious observation, the brilliant daring, and the spitfire action, talked himself into exhaustion and the audience into lethargy, in a welter of lovely complex scenery, created by Stewart Chaney.

The mustiness of the Nineties there, and a bit of the glamour. But gallantry, ingenuity and fire are sadly missing.

This compilation of characters and adventures from the long famous series of Conan Doyle tales is related in odd form. Most of the time people sit and talk about things they have already done. Then every once in a while the lights go out. Half of a different scene slides in from one side of the stage. There some of the action under discussion is acted out.

The fault in this time-honored technique is that the flashback action is rarely more visual, physical or interesting than the conversation that was just blacked out.

This is all about some submarine plans which the notorious Prof. Moriarty is stealing from the British Admiralty to sell to the Germans.

Various sideline activities are talked over, including the shady love life of Lady Hope, whose husband is SecNav, and the murder of a spy by the youthful son of another high official.

Finally Holmes traces everything and everybody to Moriarty's villa over Reichenbach Falls. There in the play's one brief moment of action, the two enemies fall over the parapet into the water.

Basil Rathbone, so long associated with the character in films and radio, is once more Holmes. Unfortunately he is defeated before the evening begins by Mrs. Rathbone's dramatization. He talks and he talks and he talks. He seems to ask other people thousands of questions. If he occasionally slurs a syllable it must be that the muscles of his tongue and lips are simply fatigued.

There is so little action designed for him, so little brilliance of mind to display, that he is forced repeatedly to vary the picture by acting with his back to the audience. Since his pale, lean look is one of the play's few virtues, this is a pity.

Jarmila Novotna sings and skirmishes with the role of Irene Adler, remembered as the one woman who outdid Holmes. Here she does it again. And Mme. Novotna sings prettily, looks lovely in her fine gowns, and has more real sense of the period than anyone else in the play.

Thomas Gomez is effective as Moriarty, once he gets over discussing culture and ethics in pompous conversation with Sherlock. When he and Rathbone start stalking each other before the parapet, the play has its one brief sequence of suspense.

Of the others I liked best Chester Stratton, elegant and very French as a spy; Eileen Peel, straight faced as an elegant sinner, and Jack Raine, who cannot help Watson's being written as a buffoon.

"SHERLOCK HOLMES"

Play by Ouida Rathbone, based on the original stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; staged by Reginald Denham; settings and costumes by Stewart Chaney; presented by Bill Doll at the Century Theatre, October 30, 1953. The cast:

Dr. John Watson.....Jack Raine
Sherlock Holmes..Basil Rathbone
Mrs. Hudson.....Elwyn Harvey
Rt. Hon. Trelawney Hope.....John Dodsworth
Arthur Cadogan West.....Richard Wendley
Lady Hope.....Eileen Peel
Eduardo Lucas..Gregory Morton
Anna.....Margit Forssgren
Count Louis De Rothiere.....Chester Stratton
Irene Adler....Jarmila Novotna
Walker.....Terence Kilburn
Lestrade.....Bryan Herbert
Miss Alice Dunbar...Mary Orr
Andrew.....Evan Thomas
Professor Moriarty.....Thomas Gomez
Hugo Oberstein...Martin Brandt
Capt. Von Herling...Ludwig Roth
Prince Bulganin..St. John Phillipe
Gregson.....Arthur N. Stenning
Villard.....Alfred A. Hesse

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

October 31, 1953

THEATER

'Sherlock Holmes'

By WALTER F. KERR

Elementary

THEY haven't left a thing out of "Sherlock Holmes." The curtain went up at the Century last night on a misty vision of a hansom cab clopping through a Baker Street fog. In a trice we were inside that cluttered brown study, and Holmes was straining at the violin. There was a dummy silhouetted against a window, ready to receive such pin-point shots as were fired at Holmes from the street.

Under the gaslamps Watson was at work on "A Study in Scarlet," a glistening microscope stood waiting in a corner, and "shadowy figures lurked" on the walk below.

As Ouida Rathbone's compilation of four or five familiar tales plunged recklessly on into the remembered past, titled ladies slipped through voluminous portieres, floorboards were torn up to reveal the Bruce-Partington plans, Holmes exited swiftly and re-entered miraculously to dive behind handy curtains, and a whole gallery of thieves locked horns in a Swiss chalet overlooking the Reichenbach Falls. The Conan Doyle catalogue was majestically complete.

Correction. They've left just one thing out of "Sherlock Holmes"—that mellow and imperturbable charm which might have made a fond and foolish evening out of some genuine folklore. There are indications that Mr. and Mrs. Rathbone, in collaboration with their director and designer, intended a gentle and reverent prank. Across the front of the stage, for instance, a row of old-fashioned footlights range nostalgically. And Stewart Chaney's roaring blue waterfall—into which Holmes and Moriarty plunge—is an impishly tinted postcard.

There are even traces of florid, cheerful tongue-in-cheek every now and then in the performance. When Basil Rathbone snatches his tophat, swirls a cloak about him and darts for the door shouting "Come on, Watson, the game's afoot," a robust and mocking spirit seems about to take hold. When Mr. Rathbone scowls heavily and remarks "It would appear I am opposed by an array of most formidable adversaries," there is a promising lilt to the rolling old lines.

But quite a few things conspire against the full realization of a Baker Street Irregular's dream. The acting, for the most part, hasn't half enough relish in it. Even the star, who has been sucking at that pipe through some sixteen films and uncounted radio broadcasts, seems much too in earnest about the nefarious nonsense, seems to be hacking at a troublesome role rather than relaxing into a familiar one.

And his associates, under Reginald Denham's oddly unsettled direction, never do expand to handsomely heroic size. Thomas Gomez—he's the wily and corpulent Moriarty—makes a nice first impression as he beams benignly from under frowsy eyebrows. And Jarmila Novotna, playing that Irene Adler who once took a nick out of the great man's ego, is attractively brittle in her opening ripostes. But no one sustains any sort of romantic tone for long, and most of the company pick away at the plot as though it were thought fully plausible.

I'm not even sure but what Mrs. Rathbone expects us to follow her tangles attentively. In tacking together an inordinate number of episodes from the Holmes casebook, she has been liberal with her exposition and light on fanciful excitement. A scene may open with chairs and tables overturned, and an encouragingly dead body in full view. In no time, though, it has settled down to talk, and the heavily detailed catechizing isn't wittily enough done to merit its wearying length.

The production plan is rather a cluttered one. Stewart Chaney has arranged a number of rococo backgrounds, but they are shuttled back and forth on stage for the inevitable flashbacks with a good bit of clatter, with long lapses while actors leap frantically for position, and with none of that gracious fluidity which a good-natured fairy-tale had better have.

On the whole, "Sherlock Holmes" is an occasion for regret. It would have been wonderful to have the master back with us.

The New York Times

October 31, 1953

Basil Rathbone Plays 'Sherlock Holmes' in a Detective Drama Written by His Wife

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Critics have been warned by the Baker Street Irregulars to speak no ill of Sherlock Holmes in anything they may choose to say about Ouida Rathbone's play, "Sherlock Holmes," which was performed at the New Century last evening. At least that is the word passed to this commentator by Rex Stout, one of the fiercest of the Irregulars.

Nothing said here, therefore, shall impugn the greatness of Conan Doyle's master genius. And probably the Irregulars will agree with this department that neither the play nor the performance is equal to the occasion. The great private consultant of Baker Street was crisper, quicker and better coordinated than the sprawling story Mrs. Rathbone has put together about some of his exploits.

* * *

The play records a brilliant and courageous adventure in which Holmes outwits Professor Moriarty and foils an odious attempt to steal some top-secret submarine plans from the British Government. On the basis of the facts, this is a highly creditable achievement on the part of a private consultant in crime. But in the theatre it involves a lot of stage hocuspocus, a lot of scenes and flashbacks and a lot of territory. Writing under duress, it may be politic for a critic to remark that in real life Holmes could have accomplished the same results with much less trouble.

Both the play and the performance lack a point of view. Is Mrs. Rathbone affectionately satirizing the genre of superman detective fiction, or the stuffy manners of Victorian society, or is she taking Holmes' exploits at face value? There are occasional scenes that are dryly comic and some lines of dialogue so trite that they are funny, too. "Holmes, this is very serious," Dr. Watson gravely observes in the first act, and the audience titters at his pedantry. "This may lead to war," says some angry international spy in the last act, and again the audience snickers its appreciation.

* * *

But affectionate satire is not the point of view after all. For some of "Sherlock Holmes" is cloak-and-dagger bravura in the old-fashioned tradition when Mrs. Rathbone seems to be taking Conan Doyle straight. There is a confusion of styles that dissipates the story. Probably William Gillette's melodrama about "Sherlock Holmes" would seem creaky today. But in retrospect it seems to be sharper and more coherent than its current descendant.

Under Reginald Denham's direction, the performance is complicated, busy and lacking in style. Although Basil Rathbone is a very able actor and although he has played Sherlock Holmes repeatedly, superannuated Irregulars find his portrait too emotional. Gillette played him as austere, detached, intellectually alert, wearily reserved, and that still seems like the more theatrical interpretation.

Fortunately there is something of that style in the scenes Mr. Rathbone plays with Thomas Gomez, as Moriarty, and these are the most effective scenes in the play. For the two master minds make a stimulating pair of geniuses—both highly cultivated, shrewd and powerful personalities. Mr. Gomez' unctuous portrait of Moriarty makes the best foil Mr. Rathbone has in the whole cast, and you see something of Holmes' striking character and individuality in the big confrontation scene at the end of the second act.

* * *

The cast includes a number of very able actors—Jarmila Novotna, as a highly vocal Irene Adler, international concert singer and crook; Jack Raine, as a dull and loyal Dr. Watson, bless his dessicated soul; Terence Kilburn, as a blubbering wastrel; Eileen Peel, as a nervous lady with a disturbing past; Mary Orr, Chester Stratton, John Dodsworth and Gregory Morton in other parts.

Having finished designing "A Girl Can Tell" two evenings ago, Stewart Chaney designed "Sherlock Holmes" last night, and without improving on the coherence of the script. For Mrs. Rathbone's salute to the celebrated detective is cumbersome and uneven. Holmes, the great logician, would regret its untidiness.

Daily Mirror

October 31, 1953

'Sherlock' Is Authentic, With Nostalgic Touch

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The National Library Assn. recently voted Sherlock Holmes "the most famous character in the last 65 years of fiction writing." So if all the Conan Doyle devotees rush to the Century Theatre, Bill Doll will have a big hit on his hands. For there he is presenting "Sherlock Holmes," an adventure play by Ouida Rathbone.

A NATIONAL organization called the Baker Street Irregulars has become the watchdog over plays, films or radio programs about the great detective. Since none of its members found major flaws in the script during a Boston tryout, Mrs. Rathbone must have adapted the original stories with notable fidelity.

She has based her period thriller on the theft and recovery of the Bruce-Partington submarine plans. The dramatic climax is reached with the exciting battle between Sherlock and Prof. Moriarty, the master international spy, on a ledge overlooking Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland.

As you may recall, Doyle originally had Holmes crash to his doom because he had tired of penning stories about him. But public demand forced him to revive the immortal sleuth. In this instance, Moriarty gets the worst of the plunge. Sherlock is quite chipper, debonair and unmarked as he vanquishes his old enemy in the final act.

* * *

MRS. RATHBONE wrote "Sherlock Holmes" at the request of many of his admirers. They wanted to see her distinguished husband, Basil, play him on the stage, as he had in 16 films and for seven years on the air waves. Well, now they have a chance to do so. Be it reported, that he is giving a suave, polished and knowing interpretation of the criminologst with whom he has been associated over the years.

Former Metropolitan Opera soprano, Jarmila Novotna, is excellent as Irene Adler, the glamorous singer, with a penchant for espionage. Irene, by the way, is the only one ever to outwit the renowned Sherlock. Thomas Gomes is quite wonderful as Prof. Moriarty, the sybaritic scoundrel who puts his intelligence to evil purpose.

Terence Kilburn gives a tense and moving performance as Walker, the young aristocrat drawn to crime through gambling losses. Eileen Peel is a handsome Lady Hope. Jack Raine is the bumbling and bewildered Dr. Watson. Salutes are also due Elwyn Harvey, John Dodsworth, Gregory Morton, Chester Stratton and Mary Orr.

* * *

REGINALD DENHAM has directed "Sherlock Holmes" with an eye for authenticity and yet a slight nostalgic, tongue-in-cheek touch. Stewart Chaney has designed gorgeous sets and costumes. The backgrounds are as elaborate and impressive as those usually found on the musical stage.

"Sherlock Holmes" is a fascinating novelty. It is at once a good melodrama and a spoof on one. We recommend it to the detective story fans as well as those merely in search of an evening of good fun.

New York Post

November 1, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

Sherlock Holmes on the Trail

Ardent Sherlockians are a jealous lot, with a fierce proprietorial interest in all that pertains to their hero. As an unofficial member of the cult, I share this fanaticism, and I may not, therefore, be the most objective judge of the play that Ouida Rathbone has devised from the immortal saga of the mighty detective. It is my fear, however, that the new "Sherlock Holmes," which opened Friday night at the Century Theater, falls somewhere between being either an affectionate tintype of the great man and his circle or a good, rousing melodrama on the subject.

On the whole, I think it is best when contemplating the private life of the detective, as he lies waiting to spring into action, bantering with the loyally obtuse Watson, summoning Mrs. Hudson, and receiving the hopeful clients who come to him with their mysterious cases. Indeed, the same thing may be said for the Conan Doyle stories. There is a heart-warming delight in hearing Holmes cry, "Come, Watson! The game is afoot!" that is perhaps more conducive to the joy of the elect than the cases themselves, and this is true in Mrs. Rathbone's dramatization.

Plot Sources

Nevertheless, a story is necessary, as Doyle certainly found out, and, to provide one, the authoress has gone to a number of the original tales, including "The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans," "The Final Problem" and "His Last Bow." She has also brought on Irene Adler, the adventurous beauty from "A Scandal in Bohemia," and, as was imperative, has called upon the great Prof. Moriarty, the genius of crime, to act as the menace in the background. There is much to be said for her employment of all this subject mat-

"Sherlock Holmes"—*continued*

ter, but it does make for a cluttered narrative.

The truth is that, if you went to the trouble of following the plot line of "Sherlock Holmes," you would probably find yourself in deep water merely trying to keep up with it. It is, therefore, quite natural that, in attempting to set it all down in a drama, the difficulty of clarity should present an almost insurmountable problem for the dramatist. I'm afraid Mrs. Rathbone found this out. There is a vast amount of robbery, murder, attempted murder, espionage and general skulduggery in the drama but it really doesn't arouse a great deal of excitement.

The Encounter

Even the historic encounter between Holmes and Moriarty against the background of the Reichenbach Falls is fairly lacking in suspense and drama. Although the evil professor is made into an entertaining figure by Thomas Gomez, he isn't a particularly menacing one. In fact, he emerges as rather a wistful and sentimental fellow, and it seems almost a shame that he and Holmes don't go off to raise bees together. Possibly they should have dropped Watson over the Falls. I wish there had been more effectual melodrama to go with the pleasant nostalgia.

Basil Rathbone, somewhat in trouble over a few of his lines, is a suave and agreeable Holmes, but I thought he was just a bit too much the dashing leading man. For Jack Raine's Watson, I guess the old critical word "adequate" should be brought out of temporary retirement. Jarmila Novotna is a handsome Irene Adler, and she hardly bothers with any fiction about the lady being a dangerous enemy spy. Assorted minor villains are passably played by Chester Stratton, Terence Kilburn and Gregory Morton, and Eileen Peel is believeable as a blackmailed wife. The setting is attractively atmospheric, but the play is, at best, mildly engaging as Holmes-lana.

DAILY NEWS

October 31, 1953

'Sherlock Holmes' an Affectionate And Very Handsome Production

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The name of Sherlock Holmes has been fascinating ever since Arthur Conan Doyle coined it by combining the surnames of two cricket players of his time, which was the 1890's. Doyle, a fiction writer who had decided he would do some stories about a detective, named his hero for two men who were noted British athletes. His hero has survived all these years, and last evening he appeared at the Century Theatre in a play about himself called "Sherlock Holmes."

This play, by Ouida Rathbone, is not a particularly good one, but it is most splendidly presented. The cast is admirable, with Mrs. Rathbone's husband, Basil, in his familiar movie-radio role of Sherlock; with Jack Raine as an engaging Dr. Watson and with Thomas Gomez as an absolutely perfect Professor Moriarty. The settings and costumes, by Stewart Chaney, are the most enchanting that this new season has had to offer as they range from 221-B Baker St. to the Professor's Swiss chalet on the brink of the most picturesque falls east of the Bridal Veil in the Yosemite.

Lots of Intrigue.

Mrs. Rathbone, taking bits here and there from the Holmes history, strives to contrive a melodrama highlighting the career of the great detective. She begins with an intrigue about Secret Papers, follows with a murder, continues with the wrestling match in which Sherlock and the Professor plunge over the Swiss abyss and concludes with Holmes' triumph over a dirty band of international spies who have plotted to steal Britain's plans for an underwater boat.

It is a loose plot for a public geared to the stopwatch timing of a TV thriller, but it has its compensations for old Holmes fans, of whom a few must be left. After all, some of us must thrill when Sherlock commands, "Come on, Watson, the game's afoot." But I have the mournful opinion that only us affectionate antiquarians will find excitement in "Sherlock Holmes."

The company which producer Bill Doll has assembled is a good one. Mrs. Rathbone's husband, Basil, is the perfect, patrician and incisive Sherlock. Raine and Gomez, as indicated before, are grand as Watson and Moriarty, and Jarmila Novotna makes a handsome and exotic counter-spy in a mishmash of international intrigue. One of the best of the players is Terence Kilburn, playing the role of a young weakling who has fallen in with an evil band, and Eileen Peel makes a brief and high-style appearance as a distressed lady named Lady Hope.

But I do wish Conan Doyle could have written us a play about Sherlock. Mrs. Rathbone is too respectful.

Journal American

October 31, 1953

Fun for Loyal Fans

But Play Lacks as Detective-Meller

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE IS NO QUESTION that confirmed fans of Sherlock Holmes will have a good time seeing the play of the same name that opened last night at the Century Theatre. For here are the beloved Conan Doyle characters, the familiar premises on Baker Street and the delightful atmosphere of beautiful ladies, spies and international intrigue.

For the unitiated, however, those who come to the theatre merely to see a skillful detective melodrama, I'm afraid there will be some disappointment.

It seemed to me that Ouida Rathbone, who wrote the play for her husband, Basil, might have stayed within the limits of the Holmes tradition and yet come up with something less confused and perhaps packing a more tight and plausible plot.

There are just too many lovely ladies, counts, honorables and admirals milling about to keep in view a true picture of just who's doing it to whom, why, and for how much.

Gets Full Scope

On the other hand, and speaking as a Baker Street aficionado, there is some value in all this, for Mrs. Rathbone has succeeded in bringing into action a vast number of the old Doyle stock players without whom no respectable Holmes adventure would be quite complete.

Basil Rathbone is of course familiar to almost everybody in the title role, and his wife's vehicle provides him ample opportunity to hide behind curtains, peer through microscopes and struggle in and out of complicated disguises.

Jack Raine, as Dr. Watson, has some amusing lines and succeeds in creating an even more helpless and bewildered character than many of the more prominent Watsons of the past.

Jarmila Novotna, apart from a few slight and charming song interludes, falls pleasantly into the plot as a glamorous counter-spy; Thomas Gomez enacts a properly brilliant and sinister Prof. Moriarty, and Terrence Kilburn scores heavily in a short episode as the wayward son of a British Admiralty big shot.

Sustains Mood

Stewart Chaney has ingeniously and faithfully provided a series of sets and backdrops that sustain the mood of the period, and Reginald Denham moves the large cast in and out of the complicated scenery with a minimum of confusion.

All in all it is big and ambitious and quite charming much of the time. But you'd better be a real Sherlock Holmes addict.

"A Girl Can Tell"

New York Post

October 30, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Comedy of an Eager Maiden

F. Hugh Herbert, the laureate of the tremulous young American virgin, is conducting another of his investigations into the dreams, behavior and vocabulary of the questing girl adolescents in his new comedy, "A Girl Can Tell," which opened last night at the Royale Theater. Mr. Herbert has a humorous and sympathetic touch in these matters, and, as in the case of such a play as "The Moon Is Blue," he can be very gay and entertaining about them, but here he has tried a more complicated formula and a more elaborate narrative to go with his observations.

To be blunt about it, I don't think he has carried it off successfully this time. He still has a knowing eye and a compassionate heart to go with his studies of his favorite dramatic subject, and he can still toss off an incidental comic line that provides both laughter and sense. But the story he has employed upon this occasion, which carries his heroine back and forth between girlhood and the time when she has become the mother of an eager young daughter of her own, is cumbersome and long-winded, and never very interesting in its own right.

The Suitors

In a way, I suppose it could be said that he has written a kind of mystery romance. He begins with the young mother telling her 15-year-old daughter that she, too, had her youthful sex problems, and she goes on to the narrative occupying the body of the play, wherein, during the year of innocence, 1936, she was being pursued by a flock of suitors and couldn't make up her mind between them. And it's not until the final scene that the author gives away which suitor she had selected, although, if you look carefully at the matter of casting, you won't be long in doubt.

It is, I think, one of the weaknesses of the play that one doesn't really care greatly which one she has decided on. I must say, though, that I was pleased she didn't pick her doctor. I was prejudiced against him because he had that patronizing bedside manner of saying to his patient, "How are we feeling this afternoon?" But the tale of the suitors is not especially enlivening in either its characters or its events, and the interest is confined to incidental matters, such as Mr. Herbert's fine crusade to distinguish between the use of "imply" and "infer" in a sentence.

In "The Moon Is Blue," Mr. Herbert showed great skill in keeping an almost non-existent plot spinning gaily in the air, which is not easy to do. It might appear that "A Girl Can Tell," since it has a more substantial story, would be simpler to manipulate, but it doesn't work out this way. Despite its pleasant moments of wit and observation, the new comedy lacks a steady flow of humor, brightness or insight, and it gives evidence of getting ready to rush off in various directions without ever making really steady progress toward any of them.

In the dual role of understanding mother and eager ingenue, the attractive Janet Blair has a long and difficult assignment which seems a little too much for her. Being slightly mature for the adolescent side of the character, she lacks the proper air of trustful innocence and hardly differentiates between the heroine as girl and as mother. There is an engaging performance by Paul McGrath as her vague, bemused and understanding father, and Tod Andrews as a youthful suitor and Jack Whiting as an older one are helpful. But "A Girl Can Tell" hasn't the necessary flow of gayety and charm.

"A GIRL CAN TELL"

Comedy by F. Hugh Herbert; staged by Mr. Herbert; settings by Stewart Chaney; costumes by Edith Lutyens; presented by Richard Aldrich and Richard Myers in association with Julius Fleischmann at the Royale Theatre, October 29, 1953. The cast:

Hannah.....Eulabelle Moore
Nancy.....Natalie Trundy
Vernon.....Barry McGuire
Jennifer Goodall.....Janet Blair
Artie.....Marshall Thompson
Mr. Benton.....Paul McGrath
Mrs. Benton..Lulu Mae Hubbard
Bill.....Tod Andrews
Freddie.....Donald Symington
George.....Dean Harris
J. G.....Jack Whiting
Natasha.....Joan Wetmore
Emmett.....William Kester

Phone Voices:

David.....Bill Windom
D. F.....Henry Hart

New York Herald Tribune

October 30, 1953

THEATER

'A Girl Can Tell'

By WALTER F. KERR

Not Very Lovable

THE principal question raised by "A Girl Can Tell" is which of six possible swains Jennifer Goodall should marry. As I see it, this is her problem. I've wash my hands of it.

In the garrulous and just not very ingratiating new comedy at the Royale, author F. Hugh Herbert is once more giving his full attention to the (entirely innocent) sex life of the marriageable female. Having turned out one very winning heroine in "The Moon Is Blue," Mr. Herbert seems unwilling to part with the stencil. Jennifer Goodall, like the girl who preceded her, is young, adventurous, and belligerently innocent—the sort of girl who bounces into a passionate fellow's apartment for the purely scientific purpose of seeing how far he will go.

• • •

Jennifer covers a lot of territory. She is besieged, simultaneously, by (a) a fidgety young Harvard man with a plaintive whine, (b) a prim manufacturer of mothballs, who looks as though he'd been preserved in them, (c) a family doctor with a great deal of patience, (d) a middle-aged employer given to patting her hand, (e) a sales executive with a longer reach, and (f) a curiously surly wolf who never seduces a girl except in the spirit of good, clean fun.

With all of them Jennifer is arch, wide-eyed and impudently challenging. By the end of Act 2 the wolf can take no more of it. "You're beautiful," he snarls, "and you're desirable—but not very lovable." I'm afraid that just about says it.

• • •

Janet Blair is the starry-eyed temptress who causes more trouble than she counts on, and if she doesn't seem exactly dazzling in the part it's probably no fault of her own. Miss Blair first appears as a mother whose adolescent daughter needs to be told a few things about romance, and then—in an extended series of featherweight flashbacks—as the seventeen-year-old charmer she was in her youth. Miss Blair is stunning to look at, and the age-range presents no problem. But she is, very patently, a knowing and capable sort with a resonant voice and enormous composure. Asked to flounce fitfully from male to male, to clutch at telephones and gentlemen's coat-sleeves, and to deliver winsome lines with a stubborn naivete, she is bona-fide mink masquerading as marmot. The casting department has been nodding over at Aldrich and Myers'.

• • •

Nor is Miss Blair helped much by the conscientiously giddy things she is given to say. Author Herbert's dialogue is in this case a good many degrees below its normal urbanity.

"I don't know a single Eric," says Jennifer to a young man who has just introduced himself.

"I'm so single it's pitiful," yearns Eric, climbing over the furniture.

Mr. Herbert has had to force his fun this time out, his invention flags notoriously, and what is meant for a marital merry-go-round becomes as insistently repetitive as the clamor of Jennifer's telephone.

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Some of the family are pleasant, though. Paul McGrath, for instance, is owlishly wry as a father who'd like to unload his daughter so that he can dispose of the family manse and take off in a trailer. Either Mr. Herbert has thought of brighter quips for this caustic head of a romantically minded household, or Mr. McGrath has his own special alchemy for dealing with them. In any case, the actor's every appearance is thoroughly welcome.

Jack Whiting makes an amusing caricature of an employer who teeters between a brooding distress over his wife's dalliance with Buddhism and his unbounded enthusiasm for the wonders of Chicago. Joan Wetmore has a nice bit as a Vanity Fair editor with a Russian accent, a wad of chewing gum and a wristful of noisy bangles, and Eulabelle Moore is dutifully hearty as an understanding maid-of-all-work. The gentlemen chasers, more or less in order of their ardor, are Tod Andrews, Marshall Thompson, Dean Harens, Donald Symington and William Kester.

The New York Times

October 30, 1953

Janet Blair Has the Chief Role in F. Hugh Herbert's New Comedy About Love

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Having declared that the idea of "A Girl Can Tell" came from his own family, F. Hugh Herbert ought to be cautious about going home. He at least should toss his hat in the door before he enters. For the characters of his new comedy, which was acted at the Royale last evening, are monumentally uninteresting and the central idea gets pretty tedious before he brings down the curtain and lets the folks go home.

In "The Moon Is Blue" Mr. Herbert talked racily about sex without ever breaking the law deliberately. "A Girl Can Tell" develops the same formula a little further. Mr. Herbert is still operating within the law. But his chief preoccupation is still with seduction and dalliance. Sooner or later he will have to say what he means bluntly and then he will have no play at all. A frank statement of his basic theme would put him out of business.

* * *

"A Girl Can Tell" begins with a hearty Negro maid who yells endearing familiarities to absent members of the family and laughs raucously over some private joke. That is about the most venerable entrance into stock farce since the electric light was invented. Basically "A Girl Can Tell" is a farce about a mother's reminiscences of her mating time, told to her adolescent daughter. As a young lady, the mother was very popular. All the boys were crazy about her—bringing her gifts, making adoring speeches and kissing her vehemently.

Don't get any wrong ideas, however. She is virtuous, or so Mr. Herbert declares. But this does not prevent her from rushing off to Chicago with her boss who loves her passionately or from calling on one of her beaux at night in his bachelor apartment. Mr. Herbert knows how to let a theatergoer have his cake and eat it, too. He's the only playwright who has ever succeeded in squaring the circle.

* * *

Although he talks big, his play is small and even monotonous. Love, romance and sex are wonderful topics, but Mr. Herbert can make them about as appetizing as dish-water. And although his heroine's boy friends regard her as irresistible, there can be another school of thought about her. She is also a case of arrested development. Furthermore, her adolescent daughter is going to be just like her. This menace is going straight down through generations.

As his own director, Mr. Herbert has accented the cute, the coy and the prurient in the performance. You might say that "A Girl Can Tell" has been dropped on the stage carelessly. Janet Blair, a good-looking young lady, plays the part of Mr. Herbert's enchantress with disarming good nature. The cast includes swains in many wooing styles—Marshall Thompson, Tod Andrews, Donald Symington, Dean Harens, Jack Whiting and William Kester.

Paul McGrath plays the father with casual humor, and Lulu Mae Hubbard plays the mother with pleasant simplicity. As a Russian woman of the world, Joan Wetmore has one ebullient scene. Eulabelle Moore provides the routine comic relief as the cackling household maid.

Credit Stewart Chaney for designing the proper scenery for Mr. Herbert's improper little antic, and for designing a series of nostalgic curtains that unite the various scenes. No doubt everyone has worked very hard. But the audience works hard, too. It is not an easy thing to enjoy slatternly farces like "A Girl Can Tell."

Daily Mirror

October 30, 1953

'A Girl Can Tell' a Breezy Comedy at the Royale

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The two Richards, Aldrich and Myers, have plowed back some of their huge profits from "The Moon Is Blue" into another comedy by F. Hugh Herbert called "A Girl Can Tell." While the new arrival at the Royale Theatre is no "Moon," it should further enrich the coffers of its sponsors.

"A GIRL CAN TELL" has a rambling structure and an element of suspense. It begins with a pretty, young mother telling her cute—that's a word that author Herbert says Americans have a habit of applying to almost everything—young daughter about the romances that preceded her marriage.

As she opens her scrapbooks, there are flashbacks to episodes with her many suitors. And the audience doesn't learn the identity of the lucky one until the final scene. Among them are a C.P.A., a mothball manufacturer, a college senior, a promising surgeon, a television scripter and an advertising tycoon.

Though Jennifer Goodall's numerous affairs are always innocent, Herbert has somehow managed to spice them up a bit. Jennifer is usually looking for thrills, but her beaux are of the protective sort. The result is a pleasant, sophisticated comedy that should have an especial appeal for women. Particularly those who go to matinees.

* * *

UNDER HERBERT'S shrewd direction, an excellent cast makes "A Girl Can Tell" a sprightly and entertaining romp. Janet Blair is quite charming as the flirtatious Jennifer. Paul McGrath and Lulu Mae Hubbard are perfect as her unconventional, sensible parents. Tod Andrews is ingratiating as the C.P.A. who attempts to resist the wiles of the girl whom he thinks spoiled by too much attention.

Donald Symington, Dean Harens, William Kester, and Marshall Thompson are good as other suitors. Joan Wetmore offers a tongue-in-cheek portrait of a temperamental Russian fashion expert. Eulabelle Moore is amusing as a hearty and knowing maid. Natalie Trundy and Barry McGuire are likable as representatives of the present generation.

Jack Whiting, the veteran show stealer, contributes some delightful moments as a middle-aged millionaire with young ideas. McGrath, Whiting and Miss Blair are really standouts. Given the best dialogue, the soundest characterizations, they make the most of them.

* * *

STEWART CHANEY has designed attractive sets. His tasteful drawing room, the background for most of Jennifer's courtships has a sprung door that conveniently refuses to shut when the swains become unusually amorous.

"A Girl Can Tell" is no masterpiece, but it is a breezy, enjoyable comedy. And right now Broadway can use one. Though it is on the thin side, it is nevertheless an amiable, high-spirited frolic. Its people are human, and its lines often sparkling. We had a good time and think you will, too

New York World-Telegram and The [illegible] Sun

October 30, 1953

Janet Blair Bows In With 'A Girl Can Tell'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"A Girl Can Tell" at the Royale Theater is one of the cutest ideas for a play anybody ever had. Once more F. Hugh Herbert is exploring the ways and means of teen-age females on the prowl for mates.

It is a subject he has perused with gaiety and wit in the past, most recently and with most success in "The Moon Is Blue." Now he has fallen upon the conceit of showing a young lady in the process of teasing along seven or eight beaus. For theatrical suspense, the play is so designed that not until the last moment, in what you might call a flash forward, do you discover which boy she has chosen.

Parental Audience.

There may be a sizeable audience for "A Girl Can Tell," made up largely of the parents of teen-age daughters. For my part, I find Mr. Herbert has overreached himself in several important directions.

The play is comedy, farce, melodrama and whimsy in unequal portions, and has the skittish manner of a forced, terribly gay, movie. It moves about scenically in a way that lets the show look like a million dollars. But the truth is that the characters are such faithfully rigid types, that hardly one of them is really interesting.

The author has directed the play so that the joke of repetition, which is, after all, the big idea, is observed with a vengeance in the stage movement and acting. Sometimes it is very difficult to remember which of the young men is which. This may be a legitimate part of the whole joke, but it does not increase the joy of watching.

Old Scrapbooks.

Janet Blair plays the title role, beginning as a youthful mother whose youngster begs her to explain some old scrapbooks. There

is a series of flashbacks of mother's romances. She is kissed continually by one and all of her gentlemen callers, while her father cheers her on.

Miss Blair is pretty, gay and blithe, at any age. Her chief difficulty is one her director should have cured, since she does not realize that when an actor looks at the house and beams with joy while he delivers a joke, nobody else has to laugh, and few in the audience will.

Paul McGrath is a cheerful father, right in the spirit of things. You may wish in the third act that he would stop spitting out grape seeds, but that is a minor monotony in a pleasant Pop.

The Jovial Boss.

Of the boys, there is Marshall Thompson as a young version of Clarence Day's Father, Donald Symington as the one who makes mothballs, Dean Harens as the lad with the serious line, Jack Whiting as the jovial boss who takes the Girl to Chicago on strictly business, William Kester as her doctor, and Tod Andrews, who has more to work with, as the boy who thought our heroine spoiled and trivial, and tells her so.

I wish the play was less talky and the kids more interesting. But if you find them witty rather than touching in real life, you probably will here.

DAILY NEWS

October 30, 1953

In 'A Girl Can Tell' Janet Blair Has Pick of Several Males, All Willing

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In the course of writing such maypole festivals as "Kiss and Tell" and "The Moon Is Blue," F. Hugh Herbert has synthesized and has a patent pending on a female. Its features include a very easy clutch, a well-distributed chassis and a fire-power kiss. It is, according to its manufacturer, just the thing a man would go for. The very latest model was placed on view at the Royale Theatre last evening in a hanky-panky titled "A Girl Can Tell."

Janet Blair is the newest female from the F. Hugh Herbert factory. Her clutch is admirable, her chassis is beautifully balanced and from where I sat in the fifth row I surmise that her kisses are fire-power. Men go for her. And that is the plot of "A Girl Can Tell."

Garden of Memories

The comedy starts — or begins, anyhow—with Miss Blair, looking like an old woman of 24, leafing through an ancient picture album with her daughter, Natalie Trundy, who looks like a young woman of 15. This picture album shows all the beaus Miss Blair used to have before she made up her mind, if any, and married Natalie's father.

Now the comedy flashbacks, or perhaps backflashes, to the wonderful days when Miss Blair was pursued by so many male types, from tycoons to goons, that she scarcely had time to get off the sofa of her father's living room. As the pages of the album turn over—and very picturesque scrims they are, painted by Stewart Chaney—one follows Miss Blair from the year 1936 to the year 1953. In 1953 her clutch is still in working order, which shows what a careful designer F. Hugh H. is.

Who's Lucky Man?

Miss Blair's suitors include Marshall Thompson, playing a character not unlike Penrod; Tod Andrews, a stronger type; Donald Symington, nice in his way; Dean Harens, who is addicted to F. Hugh epigrams; Jack Whiting, a millionaire advertising man, and William Kester, a doctor who seems to have the inside track for a while because he has taken out Janet's pretty little appendix.

Well, as Mr. Herbert points out in his title, a girl can tell, and it takes his heroine only six and a half weeks to pick a husband from among the contestants. If I told you which one I'd be violating some kind of an oath, for the suspense in the final scene, in which Miss Blair, her daughter and the picture album are awaiting the homecoming of the master of the house, is almost —and may even be—unbearable.

Now, if I had been this girl I would have married her father, Paul McGrath, who is a pleasant, sensible, humorous and easy-going fellow. But that would be incest, and in the theatre we leave such stuff to Sophocles and not F. Hugh Herbert. "A Girl Can Tell" is a nice family-type play with quite a few funny lines about sex.

Journal-American

October 30, 1953

Light Comedy Fails to Click

By JOHN McCLAIN

F. HUGH HERBERT, a gifted writer of comedies dealing almost entirely with the stirrings of love within the young female breast, appears to have exhausted the subject in "A Girl Can Tell," which opened last night at the Royale Theatre.

Here again are very much the same people we met a couple of seasons ago in "The Moon Is Blue": the girl has a bright and wide-eyed attitude toward young males and the problems of sex and marriage; her elders maintain a sophisticated detachment, but for the entire evening there is the same undercurrent.

Not a minute goes by in which somebody isn't either kissing or talking about it.

This dedication to young love has lured a lot of loot into the Herbert coffers, and will probably continue in the future, but I thought his effort last night came a cropper.

Nice People

There were moments of fun, and a respectable number of easily identifiable Herbert lines, and the people were all nice attractive people, most of them highly competent, but the whole thing didn't seem to be going anywhere.

What we witnessed, for most of two hours, was an improbable young lady hashing up the emotions of a half dozen rational men of various ages and not being either hilarious or attractive enough to justify that much concentration.

It is most difficult to make sex seem boring, but this kid gave it a good try.

Mr. Herbert's opera employs a familiar movie technique, the flash-back. In this instance a mother is going through a memory book with her adolescent daughter, and the first thing you know the curtain is lowered and raised and there you are, back with the mother and the five or six young men she did most of her kissing with in her youth.

There is a boy from Harvard, a young moth ball executive, a junior certified public accountant, a copy writer, the fifty-ish head of an ad agency, and, finally, a doctor.

Elusive Charm

With a single exception these characters are driven to distraction by the elusive charm of this girl who says little, if anything, of import, whose manners are something less than shoddy and who goes into long clinches with each of them in regular rotation.

These romantic interludes are interrupted now and again by her father who, when he finally enters his parlor and fails to find her in the arms of a swain, is convinced he stumbled into the wrong house.

There is supposed to be a certain suspense in the last scene regarding just which of these suitors will emerge as her husband, but by that time I really didn't care. In fact, I felt a little sorry when I found out; I thought the fellow had more sense.

This begins to sound singularly damaging for Janet Blair, who plays the girl, but I feel she is only slightly at fault. Since she is given no very positive character—only the usual one of being attractive and gay —it would appear that the proceedings could have been improved by casting someone slightly off-center in the part. Sure, just find another Barbara Bel Geddes.

The other roles, however synthetic were capably handled. I liked particularly Paul McGrath, as the father; Marshall Thompson, as Artie; Tod Andrews, as Bill; Joan Wetmore, in the Russian bit; Jack Whiting as the big ad man, and Eulabelle Moore as Hannah, the maid.

Stewart Chaney evolved several handsome interiors and a fine set of entre-act curtains, but I'm afraid their days at the Royale are numbered.

"Gently Does It"

Journal American

October 29, 1953

Murder-Meller Too Confused

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE great regret about "Gently Does It," the British murder-meller which arrived at the Playhouse last night, is the fact that it very nearly dies of that old complaint, third-act virus.

For two acts and 10 or 15 minutes of the remaining stanza the customers are treated to a neat and beautifully acted consideration of life in the tenuous vicinity of a psychopathic killer.

Then suddenly, as the author feels events rushing toward a conclusion, the entire proceedings become intolerably confused. Janet Green, the playwright, in a desperate effort to pull a lot of strings together into a tidy ball, succeeds only in littering the surroundings with a mass of loose ends.

Having been entirely caught up with the characters and their problems one is sent out into the night with muddled emotions.

Money Murder

We see a magnificently contrived murder committed early in the first act; and from there on it seems obvious that another will follow.

This mood and the desperate sense of expectancy grow through the succeeding sequences, but when the crucial moment arrives we are confronted by a series of events that require the talents of an International Business Machine.

Anthony Oliver kills Phyllis Povah for her money, but the homicide is dismissed quite reasonably as an accidental death. Then he discovers, too late, that the money is going to her sister.

From that point onward we know that he will make an effort to dispense with this undesirable relative. The manner of her appearance, and the plan he has evolved for her demise are practical and intelligible. But once he begins to execute his mission it seemed to me everything became hopelessly cluttered.

There are too many cars, and a steady flow of off-stage noises of squealing brakes and motors. There is the terribly contrived appearance of the family lawyer at the precise moment. And a great abundance of background explanation—you know, the "even-in-school-his-teachers-knew-he-was-unbalanced" sort of thing.

Fine Performance

It is truly disturbing that Miss Green could not have wound the thing up in a more easily acceptable fashion.

None of this detracts from the calibre of the performances, however. Anthony Oliver is one of the most engaging and brilliantly off-center psychopaths in the recent history of theatrical medicine. And Brenda Bruce, as his interim wife, distinguishes herself in the portrayal of an ex-barmaid who married money.

Joyce Heron is plausible, until the final moments, as the murder designee; and Phyllis Povah, although quickly dispatched, gives an expert account of herself as the unfortunate first wife. Andrew Duggan is a tower of strength and perception as the lawyer and Mabel Taylor is a sympathetic though waywardly naive maid.

But even the efforts of Bretaigne Windust (love that name!), who directed, could not steer the vehicle to a satisfactory parking space. What a pity; most of it is so good.

"GENTLY DOES IT"

Play by Janet Green; staged by Bretaigne Windust; settings by George Jenkins; costumes by Virginia Volland; presented by Edward Choate and George Ross at the Playhouse Theatre, October 28, 1953. The cast:

Monica Bare.....Phyllis Povah
Emmis.....Mabel Taylor
Philip Mortimer..Andrew Duggan
Edward Bare....Anthony Oliver
Freda Jeffries...Brenda Bruce
Charlotte Young...Joyce Heron

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

October 29, 1953

THEATER

'Gently Does It'

By WALTER F. KERR

Not So Gentle

THERE'LL always be an English melodrama, at least so long as there's an invalid matron left to be disposed of. In "Gently Does It," which came to the Playhouse Wednesday, middle-aged Monica Bare sits in her late-Victorian parlor and accepts frequent sips of tea ("Drink up your tea, Monnie") from the glib young fortune-hunter she's married.

It isn't long before a family friend—the old girl's lawyer—is sniffing nervously at the air-tight room and murmuring "It beats me why you go in for these gas heaters," giving us a fairly clear hint of how Monica is to meet her end. Within moments, Monica is indeed drugged and introduced to the open gas grate, and her arrogant spouse is off on a career of connubial crime.

Author Janet Green, whose play has had some success in London, doesn't mean to settle for a single uxoricide. Her adroit killer with a Cockney accent, a lithe stride, and a lethal fascination for wealthy widows, has perfected a sort of assembly-line technique. Discovering that he hasn't come into much of Monica's money, he is quick to take up with a well heeled ex-barmaid, and plans for a second fireside fatality are neatly made.

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It is at this point that Miss Green's dalliance with polite murder turns freshest. The new Mrs. Bare is something of a match for her devious husband. She has an eye for a penny—particularly when it's her own—and a pleasantly tough-minded habit of calling his turns.

Anthony Oliver and Brenda Bruce, as Bluebeard and his bright new bride, have a good bit of fun with the candid sparring that takes up most of the second act.

Mr. Oliver is a deft performer with a brazen swagger and a chilling stare. He maneuvers his way through the play's labyrinthine plotting with a game and cocky directness, almost reveling in each new suspicion that is cast upon him. The actor cuts an agreeably macabre figure as he feeds candy to the baby blonde dynamo he has selected as Victim Number Two.

Miss Bruce is a devastating foil in these cat-and-mouse sequences. Prepared to see the funny side of everything, including sudden death, she bleats cheerfully, growls at a painting she doesn't like, skates around her new home in her stockinged feet, and snaps waspishly at her lover's cagey attempts to put hands on her cash. It's a shrewd, robust and funny performance that Miss Bruce is giving, and she makes whole sections of the play seem decidedly lively.

• • •

The author has other matters to attend to, though, and they are not all quite so invigorating. Our marital menace is finally forced to lay eyes on yet another prospect, there are two crimes in the planning stage for most of the third act, and somewhere in all this complexity the intended excitement winds down. Mostly, I think, Miss Green has tried to sustain her ingenious twists and turns on precisely the same level for far too long. The battles of the play are almost entirely verbal, there is little of the eruptive visual excitement one expects of a decent thriller, and the psychological meanderings of the final act begin to seem tediously familiar.

• • •

Director Bretaigne Windust has put a high polish on the proceedings. Though the play turns repetitious as the mortuary prospects pile up, there is never any slackening off in the taut and business-like performances. Phyllis Povah, as the first Mrs. Bare, moons foolishly over her dangerous young man very plausibly. Andrew Duggan casts a stony eye over the household doings as the dogged lawyer, Mabel Taylor makes an amusing homebody out of a loyal maid-servant, and Joyce Heron is edgily attractive as the last in a long line of swiftly seduced ladies.

George Jenkins' musty and cluttered living room is an amiable design for this sort of nonsense. But the script finally takes on something of its airlessness.

The New York Times

October 29, 1953

'Gently Does It,' a Murder Play About a Psychopath and Some Unlucky Dames

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Wait long enough in "Gently Does It," acted at The Playhouse last evening, and the hideous criminal is unmasked and sent to his doom. This is the thriller by Janet Green that was known in London as "Murder Mistaken" but has now come to New York to scare Americans.

It begins well with an airtight murder committed before your eyes with the greatest cunning and impeccable taste. It ends with some pleasant horrors pertaining to another murder that does not quite succeed. Since it is acted well, particularly by Anthony Oliver and Brenda Bruce, perhaps we should not grumble about the tedious middle sections when "Gently Does It" rambles all over the Kentish landscape.

* * *

But that is the place where you begin to suspect that "Gently Does It" is not a fine, crisp crime but a drama written by a fallible human being. There is enough small talk in the second act and in half the third act to supply all the plays of the season and service cocktail parties until Thanksgiving.

Edward Bare is a cold-blooded murderer—fine. He dispatches his first wife by rigging her death by gas poisoning to look like an accident—very fine, indeed. In the last act he almost succeeds in arranging the accidental death of her sister, which again is much to his credit. The Baker Street Irregulars, now sharpening their wits to examine "Sherlock Holmes" on Friday evening, might not endorse all the details of these homicides, but most of us are content with home-grown murders as savory as the one Miss Green has served up in her first act.

* * *

It's a long time, however, between Eddie's acts of violence. What's the purpose of all the cat-and-mouse loquacity in that second act? If it is to give the audience a chance to see Miss Bruce act the part of a vulgar heiress with a steel-trap mind, no one is going to hang the author without a hearing. For Miss Bruce is a likable actress who has a lot of impudence and vitality and a style broad enough to be vastly amusing. As the murderer, Mr. Oliver is also a definite asset. Using his mind as well as his hands and feet, he gives the play a good shaking up in every scene and makes it look interesting even when it is boring.

Under Bretaigne Windust's direction, "Gently Does It" is pretty well acted. Our own Phyllis Povah, the wholesome motherly type, is the rich, old, kind-hearted dipsomaniac who gets bumped off to shock the audience at the end of the first act; and never did a nicer gal have a nastier ending. Andrew Duggan, tall, fearless and cool, plays the suspicious lawyer who assists in trapping the villain. As the faithful housekeeper, Mabel Taylor cringes and genuflects disarmingly; and Joyce Heron plays the lady who escapes death like Katharine Cornell, whom she is fortunate enough to resemble.

* * *

As scene designer, George Jenkins has housed them in an expensively monstrous sitting room that reeks of murder, the art on the wall being a sufficient motive for crime. If the author could sustain her play as well as the actors sustain their parts, the audience would not sleep a wink for weeks. As it is, some of them are already feeling a little drowsy before the play is half over.

New York Post

October 29, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Minor British Case of Murder

Nothing can be much more placid than a placid British murder play, and the one which opened last night at the Playhouse certainly succeeds to an unhappy degree in living up to its American title of "Gently Does It." In London, where they liked it, the quiet new melodrama by Janet Green was more interestingly entitled "Murder Mistaken," but under any name, it would be far from stimulating entertainment It is safe to say that the other current English exercise in homicide called "Dial 'M' for Murder" is in no danger of having its laurels snatched from it.

"Gently Does It" is another of those plays about a dapper and arrogant little Cockney, who has a way with elderly women and goes around with a smile on his face and murder in his heart. As usual, he is trapped in the final act, has quite a showy scene of histrionics, replete with hysteria, and dashes off stage into the arms of awaiting vengeance. The Big Scene is enlivening enough, and, as always, it is well played, but by that time things have dragged on too long for comfort, and it cannot save the evening from excessive lethargy.

The Same Formula

Murder dramas of this particular school have become pretty stereotyped by now, and they need at least some slight change in the formula if they are to be properly appetizing any longer. Since you know the identity of the murderer from the start, the only suspense, of course, lies in the manner in which the killer is going to be trapped in his own net, and I'm afraid Miss Green hasn't supplied anything novel here, either. The only possibility for surprise lies in the identity of one of the women, but any detective-story fan will spot her from the start.

There is another slight handicap in the case of "Gently Does It." Neither the murder nor the murderer is *very* interesting. There is supposed to be irony in the fact that the killer doesn't realize the slaughter of his doting wife will deprive him of her fortune, rather than secure it for him, but, instead of providing the intended ironic note, the detail merely makes him seem stupid. It is my impression that there is a lot more fun watching an assassin being trapped, if he is shrewd and intelligent and not a congenital dope.

It is at least to the credit of the author that she presents her murderer as a cold-blooded monster, who kills for profit, and not a fancy psychopath. But this isn't enough. And here let me pause for a long standing lament over the passing of the murder play that is also a murder mystery. If there had just been some way by which it could have been revealed in the final act that Edward Bare really hadn't killed his wife Monica, but that the Canadian lawyer or the family maid was the real culprit, I would have forgiven everything. I'd even have settled for a butler.

As is inevitable in this sort of thing, there are several good performances. The killer is appropriately played by Anthony Oliver, and Joyce Heron is effective as the woman who is almost his last victim. The most interesting characterization, though, is contributed by Brenda Bruce as an ex-bar maid, who is all hearty, winning geniality on the surface and ruthless determination underneath. It is a skillful performance by a good actress. The veteran Phyllis Povah has a small part as the murdered wife. "Gently Does It" is very minor homicide.

DAILY NEWS

October 29, 1953

'Gently Does It,' an English Meller, Has Good Acting, a Few Thrills

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Not since Emlyn Williams played the smooth-talking bellboy in "Night Must Fall" has there been a homicidal nut quite as oily as the one played last evening by Anthony Oliver in "Gently Does It," at the Playhouse. This is an entertaining melodrama with some good scenes, some good acting and a fair chance of success.

Oliver, an English actor making his first appearance here, makes a most convincing louse, a sly fellow who would rather inherit money than earn it. To him, becoming an heir is simple enough: one first marries some money and then one becomes a widower. Following this plan, he has made himself attractive enough, in his crude way, to win the heart of Phyllis Povah. Having established himself as a loving husband beyond suspicion—even though the lady is quite a bit older than he is—he does the old girl in and makes it look like an accident. (This is the gas grate bit, so useful in all types of British fiction.)

However, Oliver's daft plan goes agley because his late wife has tied up the money in a soundly drawn will, so he must start again and wed another pecunious female. This time he picks Brenda Bruce, an ex-barmaid whose late husband left her a wad—and here he meets his match, for Miss Bruce is a tough-minded young lady who, though careless of her pelt, is careful of her pelf.

A Delightful Performance.

Miss Bruce's performance is a delight. She is a frizzy blonde with a raspy voice, a low-class laugh